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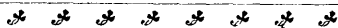
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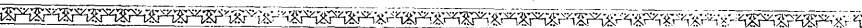
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CAN A MAN BE CONVERTED
AFTER HE IS TWENTY-THREE?



WILLIAM E. BARTON.





CAN A MAN BE CONVERTED
AFTER HE IS TWENTY-THREE?

AN ADDRESS BY
WILLIAM E. BARTON, D.D.,
PASTOR OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
OAK PARK, ILLINOIS.

WITH NEWSPAPER CRITICISMS
AND SOME ADDED REMARKS. *et*

"HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD?"
Nicodemus.

PRIVATELY PRINTED.

OAK PARK
1904.

TO
HAROLD OGDEN
PREFACE.

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The following paper was one of three on the general topic of "WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS," and was presented before the Fellowship Club of Oak Park, on December 10, 1903. The original request of the chairman was that Dr. Barton should speak on the need of a hospital for the treatment of infectious diseases, a subject in which he is particularly interested, and on which he still hopes to be heard at some future time. In the final arrangement of the programme, however, it was judged better that he should confine himself to the spiritual needs of childhood. The other speakers of the evening were Mrs. George W. Plummer, who has done notable service in securing pure milk for the children of Chicago, and who spoke on "WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS PHYSICALLY;" and Miss L. Minna Ferrell, of the Oak Park High School, who spoke on "WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS MENTALLY." The third paper by Dr. Barton on "What the Child Needs Spiritually," was intended as a plea for Christian nurture. Newspaper discussion of the paper was almost wholly confined to the single paragraph on the age of conversion. The comments of the Chicago dailies gave rise to extended remark in the newspapers of other cities. What was originally intended as a plea for the conversion of children, may serve an added purpose if it causes men and women to reflect that the probability of their changing their own life purposes steadily decreases with the passing of the years. The address is printed as originally delivered, with the press reports and some representative criticisms. Two gentlemen of the First Church have assumed responsibility for the printing of the article, earnestly desiring that it may receive the thoughtful attention, not only of parents who care for their children, but also of men, who, in the press and stress of worldly cares, have forgotten the one thing needful.

JOHN D. ROSS.
F. D. UPDIKE.

OAK PARK, January 1, 1904.

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I.

WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS SPIRITUALLY.

An Address

DELIVERED AT THE FELLOWSHIP CLUB, OAK PARK,
DECEMBER 10TH, 1903.

Only the higher forms of life possess any real childhood. In all the lowest orders, young life is sufficient unto itself, subject indeed, to great hazards and prodigious mortality, but with abundant fecundity substituted for parental care. The whole world below the vertebrate kingdom is motherless; and a great part of the vertebrate world itself, as well as all below, is fatherless. Lower life passes through its various metamorphoses, and each of them is self sufficient. Few forms of life emerge from the egg in a condition of perfect maturity, but few in their different stages of development toward that maturity have any proper childhood. The grub is in order to the butterfly, but still as a grub is capable of caring for itself; and its own mother would be incapable of recognizing it as her child, or even as belonging to her species. Childhood is a privilege enjoyed in monopoly by those forms of life which God thinks worth some months or years of preliminary training. Among the various forms of life, man stands preeminent as belonging to the race that has time for a full and well rounded childhood, covering the twenty years in which the body is reaching its physical development.

It is convenient to divide the activities of life and the faculties to be developed into those that are physical, mental and spiritual. Not that any one of the three is independent of the others, or can be separated from them, save in theory, but that those relations of the individual—the child and the man—to the totality of things within and without may thus conveniently be classified. This

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leads to the obvious truth that the spiritual development of the child can best be secured by whatever promotes his normal development in mind and in body. Herbert Spencer, who died this week, did not grasp more fully than the apostle Paul the essential oneness of the universe as related to life or the orderly methods of its progress. Paul says:

"Howbeit that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." I Cor. 15:46.

Obviously, as life is to be classified according to its highest development, and not by any one of the successive periods through which it has evolved, the natural is in order to the spiritual.

There is a time in the history of every child when the only important thing that can be done for his soul is to care properly for his bodily wants. Pure milk and hygienic clothing are spiritual gifts from God. Foul air, improper clothing, sour milk, and soothing syrups containing opium or whiskey, are agencies of the devil, detrimental not only to the child's comfort but to its spiritual well being as well. No agency is to be despised as merely physical if it is promoting, in any rational way, the well being of the child. Those who give a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple—that is a cup of water free from typhoid fever germs—or a bottle of milk that is sweet and clean, are heirs of the promise of Jesus Christ, and shall in no wise lose their reward.

But very early the child's mental and spiritual nature come to their dawning. Even during the period in which chief attention must be given to the child's physical nature, it is necessary to be watchful of its spiritual interests. Herbert Spencer divided education into five stages, corresponding to the leading kinds of activity which constitute human life. Said he:

"They may be naturally arranged into, 1. Those activities which directly minister to self preservation; 2. Those activities which, by securing the necessities of life, indirectly minister to self-preservation; 3. Those activities which have for their end the rearing and discipline of offspring; 4. Those activities which are involved in the maintenance of proper social and political relations; 5. Those miscellaneous activities which make up the leisure part of life, devoted to the gratification of the tastes and feelings."

Mr. Spencer's plea was for science in education, and his attempt was to prove that in each of these five departments the best training was that which he called scientific. Few would dispute him if the term science were made broad enough to include all that Mr. Spencer at one time and another included in it. While Mr. Spencer seemed in these five groups to sum up all that he counted necessary for human life, he himself added what was really a sixth division, though he himself made it a sub-head under æsthetic culture. He gave much space to showing that science should be followed "*because of the religious culture that it gives.*" To this end he quoted approvingly, Prof. Huxley's declaration:

"True science and true religion are twin sisters, and the separation of either from the other is sure to prove the death of both. Science prospers exactly in proportion as it is religious; and religion flourishes in exact proportion to the scientific depth and firmness of its basis."

Mr. Spencer's series has often been criticised, and justly, as exactly reversing the order that ought to be given. I presume that Mr. Spencer would have agreed with his critics, so far at least as to say that the question of relative importance depended solely on the point of view from which education was to be regarded. Certainly he takes pains to say that his last division, æsthetic culture, in which he includes religion, should not be less highly regarded than it has been, but more so in its proportion to the rest. Indeed, I think that the great philosopher would have agreed that unless human life can be so ordered as to secure a considerable degree of this æsthetic culture, or as the minister prefers to phrase it, spiritual culture, the real end of living for him would be lost. With the crusade for good milk and pure water, should be waged relentless warfare against the low vaudeville show, the open dram shop, the penny arcade with its indecent pictures, the bill-boards that depict the committing of crime, and the yellow novel with its dare-devil hero, the cheap revolver and the brothel. If we take the responsibility of compelling puny little waifs to live, and to this end provide them pure water and wholesome milk, we have assumed joint responsibility with God for their well being, and are henceforth under obligation to provide them with better

surroundings, intellectually and spiritually, than the river wards afford.

I have spoken of the fact that the "demands" of the child's physical nature precede in point of time the development of its spiritual nature. The spiritual life has however its own definite and ascertainable laws. There is a time for the awakening of the child's soul. Students of psychology have been at pains to inquire and gather statistics on the average age of conversion and the experiences attending it. They are able thus to make tables somewhat in the same way insurance companies make their mortality tables. According to these tables of average,* the spiritual nature of girls awakens about a year earlier than that of boys. Individual cases of conversion occur very early, so early that no age can be assigned; but the first marked period of religious activity in the tables, in girls, is about the age of twelve, and in boys near the age of thirteen. Then comes a drop of a year or two in which the girls are more given to giggling and gum-chewing, and boys are passing through the hobble-de-hoy epoch known as the awkward age. Both boys and girls show greatest frequency of conversion at the age of sixteen. From this there is a sharp decline on the part of the girls with a rise again at eighteen, while boys gradually decline, but show a little rise at the average age of twenty-three. According to these tables of expectancy, the ages for the conversion of boys are 13, 16-17 and 21-23, and of girls 12, 16 and 18-20. I need not here speak of the relations of those ages to physical conditions. It is enough to be assured, and the men who are at work in the laboratory do assure us, that the blood and structure of the body undergoes a physical change which corresponds to the spiritual change involved in the Christian doctrine of regeneration. If to the man of science to-day, the Savior were to say, "Marvel not that I said unto you, ye must be born again," the scientific man would answer very differently from Nicodemus, saying, "I have seen it in the laboratory and know that it is true."

As an individual, no man is ever hopeless, but as an integer in a column of averages there is little hope of the

* See "The Psychology of Conversion" by Prof. E. D. Starbuck; and "The Spiritual Life" by Prof. George A. Coe. Also the papers and addresses of Pres. G. Stanley Hall.

conversion of any man who has passed the age of twenty-three, and a greatly diminished hope for him who has passed the age of sixteen. A few years ago there was a discussion in the theological world whether probation extended beyond death. As a matter of experience, probation as related to the spiritual phenomenon known as conversion, is limited to a very brief period in the human life. No guide or teacher of the young should fail to know and act in the light of the knowledge of the facts which govern the awakening of the spiritual life of the boy or girl.

To recapitulate, the development of the physical life precedes and must have its care in order to the spiritual. The spiritual should be the aim and ideal even during the time when the physical is demanding chief attention; and finally there is a periodicity in the expectancy of conversion, and conversion is a real experience which ought to be anticipated, and without being forced, encouraged.

The living, human child is something more than that abstraction talked about in text books, which rejoice in learned discussions about "the child mind" and "the child life." The child is an individual with his own rights, which parent and teacher are bound to respect. He has a right to the possession of his individuality. Childhood is itself a part of life, with a value of its own, a value to be respected and made the most of. The important thing about childhood is that the boy or girl shall get out of its period of preparation that physical growth, that mental strength, and that spiritual development for which childhood is ordained.

The parent is not more important to the child than the child is to the parent. Of old the Bible declared, "A little child shall lead them." The child has been a leader in the world's progress and is still to be. The duty of parents and teachers is but partly fulfilled in leading their children into the kingdom of God; it is also their privilege with them to enter the kingdom of heaven as a little child.

We said in the beginning that only the higher forms of life have any proper childhood; for great and wise ends it is ordained that in human life this period of preparation shall be protracted. Jesus taught His disciples that

he who receives a little one in the meaning of discipleship, receives the Christ with the child. The conscientious parent obtains in that relation an experience unlike anything in the universe save that of Almighty God Himself. With a new meaning, those who themselves are parents may learn to say "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us that we shall be called the children of God." Nor can we fail to notice that John does not stop here but counts the evolution of this relation as having still a future. Remembering Him who lived on earth the life of the Son of man, yet who in that human life showed the moral value of the character of God, John adds, "It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we shall be like Him." This is the promise which is unto us and unto our children.

Nothing that makes a child clean, healthy, happy or intelligent is to be despised. But in the last analysis all values resolve themselves into one, and that one is spiritual. Is it well that a child shall live? Yes, if he can live well. Is it well that a child shall be strong? Yes, if he uses his strength aright. Is it well that he shall be intelligent? Yes, if intelligence is trained for virtue. Intelligence, strength, life itself are of value in proportion to their spiritual value. All the needs of a child take their character from his spiritual nature. It is her spiritual nature that makes it right to spend thousands of dollars for the education of Helen Keller, while scores of children in possession of their five senses can be had to educate for the asking. It is her spiritual nature that makes it right to call the greatest modern surgeon across the sea for one little girl without a hip joint. It is his spiritual nature that justifies the love and care of God and his children for the least of them the brethren of Jesus.

Children live, and are to live, and we have no right to deny them life. Ours is the responsibility of enabling them to live intelligent, wholesome lives, lives that are worth living now, and have promise for all the worlds in which God hereafter shall permit them to live, and inasmuch as we do it unto the least of these our Lord's brethren, we do it unto Him.

II.

THE WAY THE NEWSPAPERS REPORTED IT.

Following is the report of the address in a Chicago daily of December 11. The criticisms were based on this or similar reports.

HARD TO CONVERT A MAN.

"The spiritual period of girls is 16 years and that of boys is 17. This is the giggling and gum-chewing age of girls and the awkward age of boys. There is little chance of converting any man after he has reached the age of 23."

Dr. William E. Barton, pastor of the First Congregational church of Oak Park, made these assertions last evening in addressing the Fellowship club of that suburb on the third phrase of the general topic, "What We Owe the Child, Physically, Morally, and Spiritually." Dr. Barton said his statements were "based on tables of expectancy in statistics of evangelists prepared by experts, which are to their field what mortality tables are to life insurance companies."

EDUCATION OF LITTLE EFFECT.

"General education," Dr. Barton continued, "has little effect on the phenomenon known as conversion, which occurs in the spiritually perfect period of human life. What is to be done with the child spiritually must be done between the ages of 12 and 17. Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the teaching of a child to distinguish the coarsening influence of such things as low vaudeville and the penny arcade, with its indecent pictures.

"Anything that makes the child clean, healthy and happy is not to be despised. The spiritual nature always must be paramount. It is the spiritual character that justifies the spending of thousands of dollars on the training of Helen Keller, when there can be had thousands of children with their senses perfect. And it is the spiritual nature that justifies the calling of a surgeon accounted the best in Europe to a single child in America.

NEWSPAPER CRITICISM.

The following criticisms appeared in The Chicago Tribune of December 13.

MINISTERS OF MANY CREEDS CONTRADICT DR. BARTON.

"All the apostles were over 23 when they were converted."

This is the answer made by Bishop P. J. Muldoon, to the Rev. Dr. William E. Barton, who said that there is little chance of converting a man after he has reached that advanced age.

"The most susceptible age for conversions is between 16 and 23 years. Some are converted at 40. I have converted two at 70." This is the answer made to Dr. Barton by the Rev. Frederick E. Hopkins, who, like Dr. Barton, is a Congregationalist.

"It is never too late for a man to turn from the bad life to the good life," is the view of the Rev. R. A. White.

"While the lamp holds out to burn the vilest sinner may repent," quotes Jenkin Lloyd Jones.

"My experience does not confirm the statement of Dr. Barton," declares Dr. William M. Lawrence, pastor of the Second Baptist church.

MANY CONTRADICT DR. BARTON.

Preachers and priests of different denominations took issue in no uncertain language yesterday with the assertion of the Rev. Mr. Barton, pastor of the Oak Park Congregational church, that there is little chance of converting a man after he has reached the age of 23. Some urged that while there is life there is hope; others insisted that there is no one period in a man's life when he is more susceptible to conversion than any other period. Still others called the statements made by the Oak Park minister "ridiculous" "absurd," and "nonsensical."

The Rev. Mr. Hopkins, pastor of Pilgrim Congregational church, declared that the age of 23 is the most likely age for conversion.

"The youngest convert I ever had was an eight year old boy," he said, "but I do not call that a real case of conversion—that is, it was not genuine conversion. It was merely an example of unusual spiritual feeling. The lad was brought up in a most religious family and he was precocious in his religious feeling and ideas just as some other boys are advanced beyond their years in arithmetic."

MANY CONVERTS AT AGE OF 25.

"The period during which boys and girls are most susceptible is between the ages of 16 and 25. That is, the largest number of conversions of those with both an intelligent conception of truth and religious feeling occur between those ages. The second largest numbers occurs between the ages of 25 and 35. Many men over 40 are converted, a few over 50, and in my twenty-five years of experience I have converted two men at the age of 70 or over. A large number over 70 have grown deeply interested in religion, but have been unable to bring themselves to the point of confessing their faith openly."

"FOOLISH," SAYS BISHOP MULDOON.

Bishop Muldoon ridiculed the idea of placing an age limit on conversion.

"Why," he said, "it is too foolish to talk about. No man who knows anything about human nature or the grace of God will say that a man can't be converted after 23. The grace of God can come to a man at any time in his life. All the apostles were converted after they were 23, ministers in England are now being converted at more advanced ages, and the Romans were over 23 when they seized Christianity. Getting religion and being converted are two different things. The majority of the converts are over 23. A man's judgment is more settled after 23 than before that age, and his reason will help him to yield more quickly to religion than at an earlier period."

VIEW OF THE REV. J. S. STONE.

The Rev. James S. Stone, rector of St. James' Episcopal church, declared that the age of conversion depends on the individuality of the subject.

"Some men carry receptibility all through life," he said, "while others become set in their ideas early. Children are naturally susceptible, but I should not think of children as intelligently and reasonably taking hold. No man, until he has attained the age of 15, can be converted intelligently. Children carefully raised develop and grow up naturally into a Christian life. They drift into it, and I think much more of this slow progress toward religion than the sudden conversion.

"The best Christianity results from the gradual Christian growth of children who begin their religious training at the impressionable ages of 7, 8 and 9. Old people, however, are impressionable and readily converted. One may get a sudden religious emotion at a revival meeting, but emotion is not synonymous with religion."

CONVERTS AT ALL AGES.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones said that there is no time in life when a man cannot be converted.

"It is never too late to mend," he said, "but the earlier you begin the better, the surer you are to get them in the right way. If you want to convert a man to unthinkable theology the best thing is to begin young, and if you want to train them to the beautiful life you cannot begin too young. From 15 to 20 is the dangerous age. Emotions are at their maximum at that period—they need the most help then. But I don't convert people, I train them."

DR. WILLIAM E. BARTON REPLIES TO CRITICS.

The Chicago *Examiner* of Dec. 14, contained the following brief interview:

Replying to his critics on his assertions as to the infrequency of conversions among men over twenty-three years old, Dr. William E. Barton at the First Congregational Church of Oak Park said yesterday:

"The replies of various Chicago ministers excite my admiration. They show marked ability in refuting what was not affirmed, and in affirming what no one would dispute.

"If I had said that the mortality tables show, and the observation of men confirms, that the average man of twenty-three has more years to live than the average man of seventy, these gentlemen would apparently think the assertion disproved by their own declaration, one that he had known a man of twenty-three to die, and another that he had known a man of seventy to live yet other years. I hope the gentlemen have not overtaxed their minds."

ROSSELL FIELD'S COMMENT.

Our godly friend, Dr. Barton of Oak Park, seems to have stirred up a hornet's nest by his candid confession that "there is little chance for the conversion of any man after he has passed the age of 23," and he is immediately reminded that the disciples were all over 23 when they were converted. But inasmuch as this was brought about by the Savior Himself, and not by any Congregational, Methodist or Baptist clergyman, we can hardly accept it as a fair illustration. Out in Oak Park, where the doctor lives, everybody is converted before he is 20, where conversion is necessary. Ordinarily the young people of Oak Park take to religion as naturally as other young folk do to worldly pleasure, but once

in a while the spiritual atmosphere is clouded by the presence of a scoffer whose impious exhalations disturb the ozone, and mayhap Dr. Barton was returning from fruitless attempt to drive out the possessing devils when he gave voice to his discouraged opinion. Let us not, however, be too hard on Dr. Barton. Think what an awful problem confronts a clergyman in trying to bring into the fold a man who has lived twenty-three years in Oak Park and has never been converted!

Chicago *Evening Post*, Dec. 14, 1903

The Oak Park Reporter gathered the following comments from the Chicago papers, and re-printed them Dec. 19, 1903.

THEOLOGIANs AGREE WITH DR. BARTON THAT CONVERSIONS ARE MORE FREQUENT BETWEEN 16 AND 23.

Conversions are for young people, and when a person has passed the age of 23 the chances for winning him to religious faith are slight, in the opinions of prominent theologians and clergymen in Chicago and vicinity. All opinions expressed on this religious phenomenon agree in supporting the declaration made by Dr. William E. Barton, pastor of the First Congregational church of Oak Park, who said that the years from 16 to 23 constituted the impressionable period of religious experience.

While Northwestern University and University of Chicago professors take exceptions to the absolute limitations of this statement, all agree that conversions in cases of persons of mature years are rare. Dr. Barton's appeal to churches to realize that their labors should be with the young people is seconded by other pastors.

THEORY CORRECT, SAYS DR. LITTLE.

"Dr. Barton's theory is correct," said President Charles J. Little, of Garrett Biblical Institute. "There are, of course, many conversions after the age limit he has set, but the great majority are brought about, as he states, early in life. This is because in these years, the formative period of life, the mind is more impressionable and more receptive. It is molding into set form. A young man or young woman decides nearly everything in this period, including religious questions."

Dr. J. F. Loba, pastor of the First Congregational church of Evanston, said:

"Dr. Barton is simply following the well known figures. It has long been recognized that the age from 16 to 23 is the critical age, and that conversions, if they are to occur, must always necessarily come in these years. After that age people are by no means beyond conversion, but their habits of mind are fixed, and are less likely to be changed."

BUSINESS EXCLUDES RELIGION.

"After the age of 23 men become entangled in companionship and overburdened with business cares, so that they do not readily open their minds to conversion," said Dr. B. A. Greene, pastor of the First Baptist church of Evanston. "The statistics show clearly that Dr. Barton is in the right on the question, although there are many instances of conversion even late in life."

The Rev. Stowell R. Bryant, pastor of the Hyde Park Methodist church, said: "As a generality, as Professors Coe and Starbuck

have shown, the statement of Dr. Barton is undoubtedly true. But to any such large generalization there must be many exceptions. It is perfectly natural and to be expected that in youth, when boys and girls are thinking and dreaming of everything, they should turn to religion. There is no completeness of life without it. The religious life is life indeed. And boys and girls most of all want to live. I should scarcely say there is 'little chance.' There is always a chance, and a chance for all. The heart of the Gospel declares that it is never too late to mend. But as a matter of statistics, so far as we can get statistics upon such a problem, conversions after the age of 23 are undoubtedly rare."

LIMIT SHOULD BE ELASTIC.

"As a general idea," Dr. Herbert L. Willett said, "Dr. Barton's statement is correct. Of course, we cannot set a limit after which conversions will not occur, for we see too many instances of conversions among people grown old. But it is a well-known fact that young natures are most affected by the religious life. Most conversions come before the age of 23, or not at all.

"It is well for the church to recognize that it can do its most effective work with the young people, but it should never acknowledge that a man is lost because he has gone a certain way in life without conversion."



FORMATIVE PERIOD IS EARLY.

Professor Charles R. Henderson, of the University of Chicago, believes Dr. Barton's statement is correct.

"The new psychology," he said, "is teaching us nothing the world has not known for centuries. As the twig is bent, so will the tree grow. Most men form their ideas of living when they are young. They get the great guiding principles of their lives in the impressionable period of youth. Of course, we cannot set a deadline for conversions. We cannot say that after a man is 23 or 40 or even 50 years old, he is lost, and will never be converted.

"I have known hardened criminals, more than 50 years of age, to be converted and reformed. But these cases are rare, and men of this sort always regret that they could not have seen the right way of living in their youth, and are influenced by the right principles, without ever publicly acknowledging them until later in life. The religious age is from 12 to 20, and the chances are that an person who passes 23 without conversion will not be converted at all."

III.

Dr. BARTON'S CLOSING WORD.

After reading the newspaper comments, I do not care to change any of the statements in the address as delivered, but only to emphasize the original point, the importance of leading our boys and girls at the favorable time across the threshold into the Christian life; and to accentuate the statement, around which discussion has gathered, concerning conversion in later life.

A REPLY TO CRITICISM.

Only in recent years has there been any effort to make tables of averages relating to the awakening of religious life. The tables represent original inquiry by several well known scholars, working independently, and the results, particularly as given by Professor Starbuck and Professor Coe, afford material for study in the psychology of conversion. People are converted under widely varying circumstances and at all ages, just as people die at different ages and from different causes. Nevertheless, there are, in mortality and in conversion, certain periods of expectancy as determined by human experience. On the mortality tables the science of life insurance is built. Its whole plan rests upon the fact that the individual man may die at any time, but that the average man of a given age has a certain expectancy of life. Out of one thousand men aged twenty, 939 will live to be thirty; but out of a thousand men aged ninety, only four will live to be a hundred. These four will outlive the sixty-one who die between twenty and thirty. Hence no man will be safe in saying that of two men, one twenty and the other ninety, the younger man will live longer than the older, but he is safe in saying that the average chance of life for a man of twenty to live ten years longer, is more than 200 times as good as the chance of life for the average man of ninety. A boy of fifteen may die before his grandfather who is eighty-five; but the chances are 347 to 1 that the boy will live another year, and only 4 to 1 in favor of the old man—the boy's chance is eighty-seven times as good as his grandfather's.

It is this same law of average, that applies to the arithmetic of conversion. So long as the human will is free, any man can at any time turn from sin, seek forgiveness and become a Christian. But if we want to know what is the probability that men will do this, we must turn to the average of human experience so far as that is tabulated for our information. According to the tables to which I have referred, the experience of Christian life in America indicates that a great majority of men and women who publicly confess Christ do so between the ages of twelve and twenty years. It is no answer to these figures to say that people can be converted at any time, or that men have been known to change their habits of life and their life ideals at fifty or seventy. No sane man ever denied the possibility of such a thing. This is where the criticisms fail. Nor is it at all to the point that the apostles were converted after they were twenty-three. All new churches start with an adult membership. Anyone who has read church history knows that the problem of Christian nurture came as a distinctly new problem to the age following the apostles. The simple question is, how likely is a man to turn from worldliness and begin a religious life after he has chosen his life habits, ideals and associates? The answer is a simple one to any man of observation, and the statistics confirm it. As an individual, it is always possible for a man to be converted, but the average chance of conversion diminishes almost to zero after a man has passed the age of twenty-three.

THE CONVERSION OF CHILDREN.

Not without some show of reason has human life been divided into periods of seven years. At the third of these periods, as reckoned by legislation, manhood begins; but the second is hardly less important. The child may then choose a guardian, and has certain rights before the law, which are a distinct anticipation of the powers of coming manhood. At, or about, this age many christian sects perform the rite of confirmation. Jesus was a precocious child, and at the age of twelve went to Jerusalem to become a "Son of the law," a rite into which most Jewish boys entered at fourteen. The period of adolescence is

most critical for the child. The voice changes; habits and associations undergo a revolution; unexpected traits, tastes and aversions appear. The young life aligns itself to new conditions. Too often parents view these changes with less of sympathy than is their due. There is often a period of seemingly deliberate badness, with obstinacy, sulkiness, irritability and disobedience. There is a demand for new liberty, and unwonted self-assertion that often perplexes the father and mother and teacher. It is not safe, however, to assume that all these traits are indications of permanent depravity. It is the time of transition. The child is pulling hard at the bit, and the parent hardly knows whether to slacken the rein or hold the tighter. Sometimes a cut of the whip causes a runaway, and an injudicious jerking of the lines causes them to snap. But the thoughtful and wise parent will recognize this as the golden opportunity for a new leadership, in which affection and sympathy are substituted for part of the authority of former years. The child thinks himself to have become a man; the parent can hardly realize that he is not still a little child; both are partly wrong. The child is still a child, but has become a man like one of us, knowing good and evil. We can no longer force him, but we can inspire him to choose the good. With the tree of knowledge, whose fruit he will now eat whether we forbid him or not, we may impart the fruitage of the tree of life. It is a time when the parent may well sacrifice every other interest to that of guidance and sympathetic companionship. The boy needs his mother then, but he needs his father also; and the girl may come to a new admiration of her father and her brothers, and at the same time to a new appreciation of the beauty of her relation to her mother. Both boy and girl are ready now as never before to think of the meaning and mystery and responsibility of life. Without shaking from the bough the unripe fruit, or leaving it till it drops and is lost in the weeds, the thoughtful parent or teacher will watch for the moment of ripening, that the young life may be brought with all its possibilities of fruitfulness into the heavenly kingdom. For this great achievement, on whose accomplishment hang eternal results, the few short years of adoles-

scence offer their inviting and perilous opportunity. The parent who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

THE CONVERSION OF PARENTS.

But how shall the stream rise higher than the fountain, or the child acquire a love of religion unless he is guided thereto by the father?

The Book of Kings tells us how Elisha, seeing his Shunamite hostess coming to see him, burdened with the dead body of her little boy, sent his servant to meet her, and to inquire unto her, "Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with thy child?" (II Kings 4:26). The mother choked her doubt and her sob, and answered "It is well."

I am very glad that she knew whether it was well with the child or not. Her husband did not know, for he was busy with the crops, and left such matters to his wife. The son was dead, and the father was too busy to learn the fact. The wife had gone to the prophet to see if he could be brought to life again. The husband could hardly have been too busy to have gone with her, but would probably have disapproved of the errand as wholly unlikely to be of more than sentimental value; and so she did not trouble him about it. If the boy's restoration had depended upon the father, there would have been a little grave in Shunam. It was well with the child; that is, it was well that he had such a mother.

I bring no railing accusation against the father of this child. He might have been far worse. He did not oppose his wife in her own religious life. He readily acceded to her suggestion for the building of the prophet's chamber. He was successful in business, and was entirely willing that his wife should spend money—money which he earned—for the support of religion. All this was well as far as it went, and in many respects, theirs was a happy home. The father was doubtless affectionate both toward his wife and his child, and favorably disposed toward religion; but when this woman had to meet the great crisis of her life, she met it alone. Her husband was not with her.

It is not well for the child that families should be thus

divided, on the greatest and most important of all matters pertaining to their family life. The boy needs the father's example as well as the mother's prayers to keep him in the way of righteousness. There are a good many households where the husband, who is himself by no means a bad man, is content in his attitude of passive satisfaction with his wife's religion. The ideal home is one where husband and wife are united in their thought and prayer, and in their labor to bring their children into the kingdom of God.

It is well for the child that he is a child, and well also that he does not always remain a child. Childhood is a transition and a perfectly natural one. Even the faults and failings of childhood have their important relation to that which the child is destined to be. The child has in him the making of a man as we are often told. He has in him the making of two men, himself and his father. The child is to some extent what the father makes him, but the father as a father, is what he is made by the child. A little child shall lead them, is the old and true story of human progress.

There is no lack of present readiness on the part of fathers and mothers to promote the welfare of their children in so far as larger opportunities for education and freedom from restraint are concerned. The average child has reason to complain of nothing unless it be that as a rule too much is done for him to enable him to get the utmost out of his own childhood. If the child has reason to complain at all, it is in the diminishing of the personal element in the relation between parent and child. Important as this relation is in every department of the home, it cannot be least so in the child's religious life. It is here that the example counts for most, and here that wholesome precept is most expected and most effective. There is little need to fear that parents will do any harm in leading their children into an early personal relation with the Church of Christ, especially if that relation be heartily shared by the fathers and mothers themselves. The fear that children if too early committed to the service of the Lord, will later turn against it, is not without some foundation, but there is far less reason to apprehend this danger

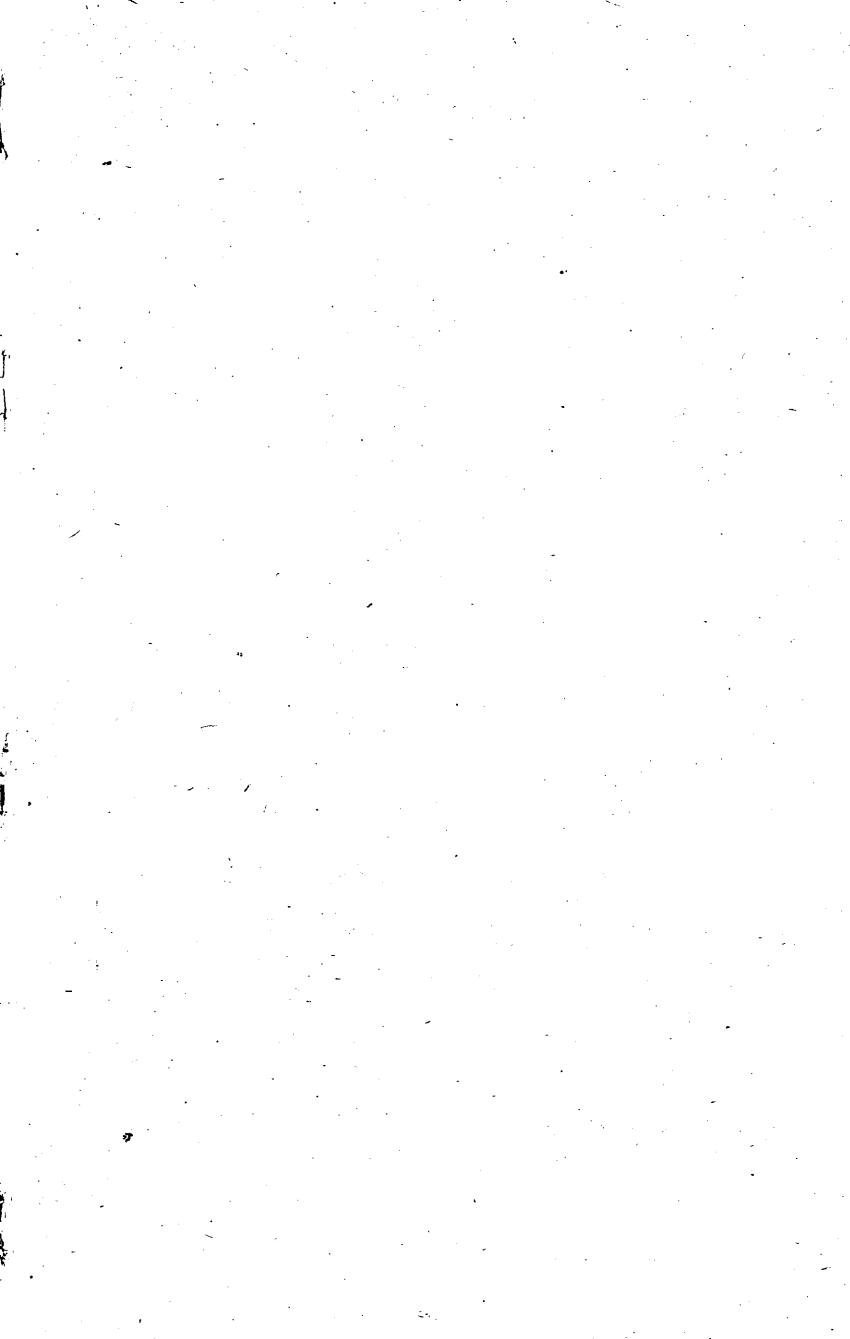
than to fear the result of indifference on the parents' part or an assumption that the work of the church or Sunday School renders parental influence unnecessary. The child will grow up, not without knowledge of the truth, but with no more personal devotion to it than that which his parents' example leads him to believe that they deem requisite. It is not well for the child that his parents should guide him in all the lesser concerns of life, and leave him to work his uncertain way alone into the experiences of Christian living. Nor is it well for the parent that he should fail at this time to renew his own youth and to enter into the kingdom as a little child.

It is well for the home that the child should be a Christian. It is well for the father that he should tread again in the experiences of his child, the path by which faith finds its way to God. It is well that the home should be united, and that all its interests should center in those things which last the longest and are of most vital consequence.

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked the question and it is pertinent to-day. To admit that it is possible, is not to prove that it will come to pass. The claims of religion are so reasonable and of such transcendent importance that few thoughtful and right-minded men can ignore them if they are given consecutive attention. But the pressure of business and the demands of social life are with us all the week, and even Sunday is not wholly free from their encroachments. Will the man to whom this message comes give heed to this appeal? Life has many valuable interests, but only one of supreme importance. Seek the others, but seek first the kingdom of God and the rest shall be added.

I appeal to fathers who rejoice that their wives are members of the church, and who are happy when their children follow the example of their mothers. Do not throw upon the mother the sole responsibility for the children's conversion. The father's example is often more potent than the mother's teaching. I appeal to men of integrity and character in the community, to take that stand for Christ and for the Church which shall place them in their true light before their fellow men. I appeal to those who ask whether such a choice will involve a sacrifice of some amuse-

ment or worldly indulgence, to let no such trivial consideration, nor even a larger one, stand in the way of so important a decision. I appeal to those who have doubts about some article in the creed, but who cherish no doubt about the value of righteousness, or the glory of the ideal made manifest in Christ. Do not for some question which is non-essential neglect and lose that which is of such vast consequence to you and your households and your neighbors. What a glorious New Year this would be if it could be celebrated by a large number of thoughtful men adding this to their New Year's resolutions, that they will wait no longer for a thing that ought to be done, but now and for all coming life will confess themselves followers of Christ. Such a celebration is easily possible. Will those to whom this message comes help to make it actual?



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